

Struggling Together after the Pan-Amazon Synod

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Introduction

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region on the theme, 'Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology', was an historic event which took place in Rome from 6th-27th October 2019. Many believe it would have been more courageous to have held it in one of the Amazon regions. The Synod included the input of 90,000 Catholics from nine countries sharing the Pan-Amazonian region (Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana and French Guyana, Surinam, Brazil and Bolivia). The Amazon region was the *locus theologicus* and the indigenous people were being consulted on how the Church can accompany them today. In attendance were 185 synod fathers along with 16 representatives of different Amazonian indigenous communities, as well as 34 women as auditors or experts but they had no voting rights.

Sadly, while it is interesting to note that one lay religious brother had been granted voting rights at the Synod, the same right was not extended to any woman even though there were 20 religious sisters at the Synod who had the same canonical status as the brother. This is the third consecutive Synod of Bishops in which a religious brother was counted among the members and allowed to vote, but no women religious nor members of the indigenous laity, despite the richness of their experience, were given voting rights. Women in the Church continue to be excluded from these decision making processes.

The Final Document consisting of 5 chapters and 120 paragraphs was approved with the necessary two-thirds majority. On the 2nd February 2020, Pope Francis launched this document along with his own Exhortation 'Querida Amazonia/Beloved Amazon'. The launch coincided with the anniversary of the death of Sr. Dorothy Stang who was murdered in 2005 in the Brazilian Amazon, for defending the rights of poor people to their land.

In this article, I will begin by drawing the reader's attention to two significant events which took place during the Synod. I will then outline a number of key issues from the Final Document and end with a reflection on Pope Francis' Exhortation. I hope this article will inspire the reader to become familiar with the content of both documents and respond to the challenge to create "new paths for the Church and integral ecology." The two significant events are: The Pact of the Catacombs for our Common Home and the sad event that took place in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria in Traspontina.

Firstly, the **Pact of the Catacombs for the Common Home: For a Church with an Amazonian Face, Poor Servant, Prophetic and Samaritan.**¹

At the close of the Second Vatican Council, on November 1965, forty-two Council Fathers celebrated Mass in the Catacombs of Domitilla, in order 'to be faithful to the spirit of Jesus' in the service of the poor. They signed a document that expressed their personal commitment as bishops to the ideals of the Council. Later, more than 500 Council Fathers added their names to the pact. It became known as 'The Catacombs' Pact of the Poor and Servant

¹ The Pact of the Catacomb for our Common Home: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EUrf6dOK2c_22-MPzjmwvZHtvlvZ7GXtPdSYVvFtiow/edit?usp=sharing. A group of Synod Fathers Renews the "Pact of the Catacombs" <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-10/a-group-of-synod-fathers-renews-the-pact-of-the-catacombs.html>

Church'.² In the course of the Synod, building on this previous event, the Synod Fathers, along with Cardinal Claudio Hummes, the General relator for the Synod, celebrated Mass in the Catacombs of Domitilla, after which those who were present signed a new 'Pact of the Catacombs for the Common Home: For a Church with an Amazonian face: Poor, Servant, Prophetic and Samaritan'.

In this document the Synod Fathers committed to living a Gospel way of life. This demanded that they live a simpler lifestyle, to shun privilege, to renew their preferential option for the poor, to listen to, and to walk the with poor enabling them to preserve their cultures, identities and spiritualities. This demands that the Synod Fathers abandon 'every type of colonist mentality and posture' and to proclaim 'the liberating novelty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ'. They want to be prophetic denouncing injustice and to stand in solidarity with those who are being persecuted for defending their lands, as well as being a welcoming presence to migrants and refugees. They promised to promote an 'integral ecology', caring for our common home along with a new pastoral approach which will recognise 'the ecclesial ministries that already exist in the communities'. They also recognised their own vulnerability as they take on the challenges outlined. The commitment made by the Synod Fathers is also reflected in the Final Document of Synod.

The next significant event was:

The theft of the *Pachamama* statues, displayed in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria in Traspontina.

During the Synod, wooden statues of a pregnant Amazonian woman, symbols of the *Pachamama* (fertility goddess/mother earth) were used as part of a display in the Church in Santa Maria in Traspontina, which is located near the Vatican City. The image is sometimes used to depict 'Our Lady of the Amazon', a representation of Mary similar to Our Lady of Knock, Our Lady of Lourdes, or Our Lady of Guadalupe. On October, 18th 2019, these statues were stolen and thrown into the Tiber river by people claiming that these wooden statues were idolatrous. In every culture, images are used to help us express our understanding of Mary and to help us to pray. The people of the Amazon have a right to display the images that reflect their culture and understanding of Mary or God. Pope Francis, in his role as 'Bishop of the diocese of Rome', recognised this, apologised and asked forgiveness of the Amazonian bishops and the tribal leaders. He acknowledged that these symbols were placed in the church 'without any intention of idolatry'.³ This event highlights the difficulty and challenges of inculturation for the Church. Evangelisation is not a one-way process. It is a process of mutual enrichment. This was one of the key themes of the Synod, which is addressed in both the Final Document and in Pope Francis' Exhortation. I will now turn to the Final Document.

² The "Catacombs' Pact of the Poor and Servant Church"
<http://www.domitilla.info/idx.htm?var1=docs/pacten.htm>.

³ Pope Francis announces retrieval of indigenous statues
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-10/pope-francis-comments-on-statues-stolen-from-church.html>.

Final Document ‘The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology’: Some key points.

In his Post-Synodal Exhortation ‘Querida Amazonia’,⁴ Pope Francis, ‘officially presents the Final Document: ‘The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology’.⁵ He acknowledges that the document, ‘profited from the participation of many who know better than myself or the Roman Curia the problems and issues of the Amazon region, since they live there, they experience its suffering and they live it passionately’ (QA 3). He prays that the ‘entire Church will be enriched and challenged by the work of the synodal assembly’ (QA 4). In the light of this whole synodal process, which is still unfinished, a clear and new ‘hermeneutic’ is proposed between the ‘Final Document of the Synod’ and ‘The Apostolic Exhortation’. Pope Francis is very clear in saying that the Exhortation does not replace the Final Document of the Synod (QA 2), but assumes it (QA 3) and invites us to ‘read it and apply it’ (QA 4). I understand that this is the first time in the universal magisterium that a Final Document of a Regional Synod and the papal magisterium that follows it are given equal status. It is important to note that the Special Synod’s conclusions transcend the ecclesial-Amazonian region as similar issues are experienced across our globe.

One of the key messages from the final document can be summed up in the word *conversion*. In the Final Document there is a chapter dedicated to each of the following: integral, pastoral, cultural, ecological and synodal *conversion*. We are being called to recognise what constitutes ‘good living/ *bien vivir*’:

Which is a matter of living in harmony with oneself, with nature, with human beings and with the Supreme Being, since there is intercommunication throughout the cosmos; here there are neither exclusions nor those who exclude, and here a full life for all can be projected (Ch 1 No.9).

The Final Document presents a vision of Church, modelled on the Good Samaritan, a Church that is prophetic and missionary but one that is incarnated into a particular culture. Hence Chapter 3 is dedicated to ‘new paths of cultural conversion’. To achieve cultural *conversion* we need to promote intercultural dialogue by learning from and listen to indigenous people and promoting a Church with an ‘Amazonian face’. The need for theological research and education based on the identity and culture of the Amazonian Region is highlighted (Ch 3 No 57-59).

Chapter I reminds us of the complicity of the Church during the colonisation of the Americas, recalling that ‘the proclamation of Christ often took place in collusion with the powers that exploited the resources and oppressed the local populations’. The Church has a ‘historic opportunity to distance herself’ from ‘the new colonising powers, by listening to the Amazonian peoples and transparently exercising her prophetic activity’ (Ch 1 No.15). In order to do this, we need:

⁴ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, “Querida Amazonia”:
http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html

⁵ The Final Document “The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology”
<http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>.

To make clear where we stand, whose side we are on, what perspective we assume, how the political and ethical dimension of our word of faith and life are transmitted. For this reason: a) we denounce the violation of human rights and extractive destruction; b) we embrace and support campaigns of divestment from extractive companies responsible for the socio-ecological damage of the Amazon, starting with our own Church institutions and also in alliance with other churches (Ch 4, No.7).

Many people from the Amazon region have lost their lives denouncing violations of human rights and standing up to extractive industries.⁶ This is a challenge but if we as Church are to be prophetic and stand in solidarity with the poor and the people from the Amazon region, we have to pray for the courage to continue to denounce human rights violations and confront the exploitation of companies involved in the extractive industries, as well as demanding a 'UN Global Treaty on Business and Human Rights'.⁷

In keeping with the theme of *conversion*, the Final Document calls on us to acknowledge our 'ecological sin'. It states that 'ecological sin is an action or an omission against God, against one's neighbour, the community and the environment' (Ch 4 No.84), calling on us to look for ways in which we can repay our ecological debt, emphasising the urgent need to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases related to climate change.

Chapter V, New Paths of Synodal Conversation, explores the pastoral challenges, particularly access to Eucharist in the remote areas of the Amazon. The issues of *Viri probati*, married clergy and the need for an Amazonian Rite were debated. After much discussion, paragraph 111 got over two-thirds (128) of the votes but it also attracted the largest number of negative votes (41). The issues have been left open. Space is also given to the role of women (100-103) and the need for women's voices to be heard, to participate in the decision-making along with recognition for women who are leaders within communities. The issue of women deacons was debated. The document also refers to the need for new ways for synodal conversations, recognising the need to overcome clericalism and a pastoral approach based on a culture of listening and dialogue so that

In order to walk together, the Church today needs a conversion to the synodal experience. It needs to strengthen a culture of dialogue, reciprocal listening, spiritual discernment, consensus and communion in order to find areas and ways of joint decision-making and to respond to pastoral challenges (Ch 5 No.88).

This is the way forward. Normally, the final synodal document has no teaching or binding authority on its own. This time Pope Francis launched the Final Document of the Amazon Synod along with his own Exhortation which, as I said earlier, is quite remarkable.

⁶ 40% OF THOSE KILLED WORKED ON LAND, INDIGENOUS' PEOPLES AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS See Frontline Defenders Global Analysis 2019: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/global_analysis_2019_web.pdf

⁷ A system of corporate liability for human rights abuses is currently being negotiated in the UN. A Revised Draft of the legally binding instrument on Business and Human Rights: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGTransCorp/OEIGWG_RevisedDraft_LBI.pdf The EU and Ireland has failed to support the treaty process so far.

Pope Francis' Exhortation "Querida Amazonia"⁸

The title of this Exhortation is *Querida Amazonia*, the document is addressed to 'the people of God and to all people of good will'. The Exhortation along with the Final Document form a unit. The Exhortation is Pope Francis' personal response to the Synod. He uses imagery and poetic language while quoting a number of Latin American poets.

The Exhortation⁷ expresses the affection for those who are made poor, those who are in some way despised by the technocratic society in which we live and who suffer the consequences of this same system that puts profit above the dignity of persons, cultures and our 'common home'. The document analyses all the suffering that has been inflicted on the indigenous people and the destruction to the natural environment in the region. It calls us to advance human and ecological integration that allows for a truly human life, without oppression and injustice.

Pope Francis speaks of dreams: four great dreams (Social, Cultural, Ecological and Ecclesial). He develops in detail each of these dreams.

Pope Francis asks us to be on the side of the Amazonian people, to hear their pleas but to do so in a spirit of encounter and dialogue, 'beginning by listening to the poor' (QA 26). He acknowledges the destructive role of the Church during the so called conquest of the Americas and throughout the history of the Amazon region and reiterates his apology (QA, 19). He warns against new forms of colonisation and corruption, asking us to listen to and journey with the indigenous peoples so that we can learn to *contemplate* the Amazon region 'love the region, not simply use it, feel intimately a part of it and not only defend it; so that the Amazon region will once more become like a mother to us'(QA 55).

He calls on all of us to examine and change our 'consumeristic lifestyle and the culture of waste' by reflecting on the consequences that our decisions have on the environment. In addressing the area of inculturation, he challenges us to 'imagine a holiness with Amazonian features, called to challenge the universal Church'(QA 77).

One of the challenges of ministry in the Amazon region, is the access to Eucharist and other sacraments. With respect to women deacons and married priests, Pope Francis' response is inadequate, even though he has left the question open. The request still stands in the Final Document. The Pope also calls for more opportunities for women to 'access positions, including ecclesial services but not Holy Orders'. These ecclesial services he envisions 'would entail stability, public recognition and a commission from the bishop'. This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organisation, the most important decisions and the direction of communities, 'while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood'(QA 103).

As someone who believes in the need for systemic change within our Church, I find this very disappointing. The question of married clergy will not go away. Catholic women can and should take on a greater role in Church decisions. Patriarchy and clericalism within the Church are preventing women from doing so. Pope Francis, has been openly and repeatedly critical of clericalism as 'an illness in the Church' calling it 'our ugliest perversion', and 'the

⁸ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, "Querida Amazonia": http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html

culture that enables abuse and insists on hiding it'.⁹ Yet, he fails to really listen to the changes that the people from the Amazon region outlined in both the preparatory document and in the Final Document. Women are often at the forefront of environmental change and defending human rights. They are also among the poor, and marginalised to whom Pope Francis calls us to listen. Catholic theology does not mandate that cardinals be ordained. So, theologically and laypeople, including laywomen, could be cardinals. The only glimmer of hope I see is that the Final Document of the Synod still stands which means that these questions are now in the hands of the Bishops of the Amazon region, and the Latin American Church. Base Christian communities, which are lay led, were affirmed as 'experiences of synodality' (QA 94). Perhaps they will take the prophetic and creative step putting Synodality into practice by giving a place to all the baptised to discern the way forward, to 'find ways not yet even imagined' (QA 104).

At the end of the day we are 'united by the struggle for peace and justice' (QA 109). Pope Francis asks 'how can we not struggle together? How can we not pray and work together, side by side, to defend the poor of the Amazon region, to show the sacred countenance of the Lord, and to care for God's creation?' (QA 110).

The Exhortation cannot be understood without first reading the proposals of the Final Document. Pope Francis does not 'claim to replace that text or to duplicate it' (QA 2). His Exhortation is offered in a spirit of 'dialogue and discernment'. (QA 2). We are being invited into that process of dialogue and discernment. Therefore, it is imperative that we read in full and reflect on both the Final Document and Pope Francis' Exhortation. The Synod on the Amazon is setting out 'New Paths for the Church and Integral Ecology' and calling on us to expand our worldview. This is only the beginning, as Pope Francis insists Synodality is an ongoing process. We are now all invited by Pope Francis to 'sit around the common table, a place of conversation and of shared hopes. In this way our differences, which seem like a banner or a wall, can become a bridge' (QA 37).

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<https://www.mercyworld.org/newsroom/enews/>

⁹ See for e.g. his address to seminarian on November 26th 2018

<https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/11/clericalism-is-ugly-perversion-pope-tells-seminarians/> and his letter to all Catholics on August 20, 2019 <https://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2018/08/the-letter-of-pope-francis-august-20/>.